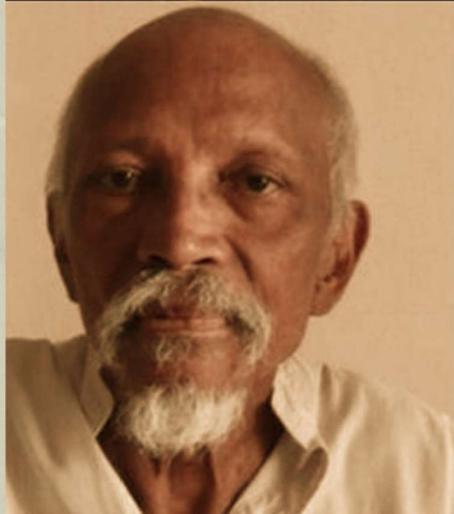
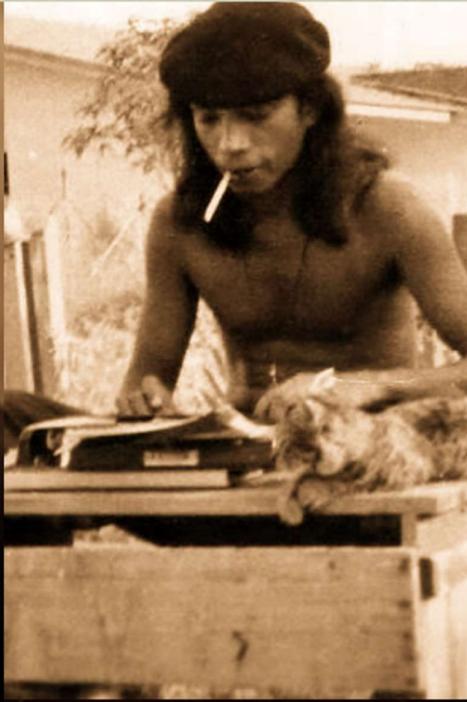


# A SPECIAL FEATURE



on the late

# SALLEH BEN JONED

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- Wong Phui Nam
  - Antares Maitreya
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## Salleh Ben Joned: A Retrospect of His Critical Writings

*Wong Phui Nam*

Beside two collections of poems, Salleh Ben Joned left us a considerable body of critical writing. It consists almost entirely of pieces he wrote for his *New Straits Times* (NST) column "As I Please" between 1991 and 1995. These pieces were collected and published in two volumes: *As I Please* (1994, Skoob Pacifica) and *Nothing is Sacred* (2003, Maya Press). Looking back, one might conclude that the publication of the column was only possible through a fortuitous coming together of favourable circumstances. Firstly, the NST's Literary Page was launched about the time when Salleh, newly returned to this country and teaching at the University of Malaya, resigned from his post ("out of boredom", as he probably claimed) and in the right state of mind to become a columnist. Then, the Literary Editor — newly appointed and himself a writer — had the good fortune of having a Managing Editor who was open-minded enough (given the language policy of the time) to consent to publishing a Literary Page in English.

Taking off from the publication of his first piece, Salleh managed a sustained two-year effort of having the column appear every week. Then he took a break in order to enter into retreat or as he put it, *khalwat*. (If you only know the meaning of the word as put out by our religious officials, you should check its real meaning by referring to the first piece "Confessions of a Literary Columnist" in *Nothing is Sacred*.) Salleh continued with the column for another three years with further additional breaks for *khalwat*. By 1995, *As I Please* had become what he was pleased to describe as "more like as and when I please." The occasions when he was pleased to write eventually ceased altogether — much to the disappointment of his many readers who had been looking forward to what Salleh was going to say every Wednesday. Even if he had the freedom to write as and when he pleased, he became "bored" with the writing. Despite the many breaks in his Wednesday columns, his legacy endures through his sizeable collection of writings from those early, exciting years.

More than anyone else, Salleh contributed to the rapid success of the page. Readers recognized immediately his wit, his ironic humour, his biting criticism, the rare capacity to entertain, and his verbal vigour. Here was a man who had much to say and he said it in a style that brought to the reader his very presence. But if it were only a matter of style, however provocative and highly entertaining, his writings would have been of a little more passing interest. What he wrote may be mostly forgotten by now — more than twenty years down the road into the twenty-

first century. But he dealt with abiding serious issues with conviction and courage. The language issue — then passionately contested — is still with us, although it is now often overshadowed by an increasingly ubiquitous and aggressive propagation of an Islam coloured by political interests. At the heart of this is still the question, albeit slanted towards a different area of contention, of language — involving the appropriation of words from another language by a particular faith, how one's definition of personal identity has far-reaching political consequences, and how language can blur the lines of morality. But when Salleh was writing his column, issues of religion had not become as divisive as it is today. His concern, therefore, was over language for literature and culture. He had much to say about important issues which we are still grappling with today.

How we use, misuse, or abuse language in the public realm — when involving important issues, in ways that may not be immediately obvious — has vital consequences to the conduct of our lives as societies, nations, and even civilizations. Language goes to the heart of human life. As a poet and critic, Salleh naturally took this as a major area of his concerns. He was particularly motivated by his enemies among the literary establishment, who were often careless, ignorant, and wilfully mishandling the power of words. They came in the shape of nationalists, cultural chauvinists, religious ideologues, pretentious lightweights, and, yes, even frog-like jumpers who aligned themselves with new political bandwagons. Salleh wrote against all such people. By these people, he meant the *sastrawan* and *cendiakawan* whom he saw as guardians of the word. They should have been the first to speak out wherever and whenever they witnessed its abuse and misuse. He saw, instead, how insidiously they harmed the body politic with their lack of seriousness towards the word. Today, more than twenty years on, we see the fruition of this in the almost universal stultification of culture, arts, intellectual life — and even morality — on a national level. To a certain extent, this may have even contributed to the divisiveness among our people.

Salleh was in a unique position to write as he did. In a purely cultural and literary sense, he had the qualifications required for the job. He was firmly rooted in his Malay heritage, and secure in his knowledge that he was not going to lose it. He had been educated and had lived quite a while in a Mat Salleh country (as he put it), and was widely read in Western literature. He had more than a passing interest and a casual understanding of mystical Sufism. And of course, he was a poet, one with a sharp critical sense. Over all this, he had the advantage of being a Muslim and Malay. Under the circumstances particular to the politics and culture in Malaysia, this placed him in a position that enabled to raise the sensitive issues that he did. Any Malaysian will understand what I mean. There is also the fact of his integrity, which gave him the moral authority to speak out. For instance, he could upbraid, as he tells us, a medicine seller turned poet for spouting dangerous

chauvinistic nonsense. He could confound a pair of venerable *Sasterawan Negara* with the Big Q about National Literature (spelt with a big NL) raised by an unsuspecting cultural visitor to this country. He could point — with undisguised derision — to the language bureaucrat who categorically put in writing that there was no room in Islam for humour. His telling of this was so ironically funny that it made us forget the dark side of his accounts, but not when he told of the poet who, without quite realizing the implication of her view, stated that Muslims should always take the side of Muslims. Moral right and wrong had no place in her calculus involving human relations.

Salleh also spoke out against other inanities, such as the frequent organised public *deklamasi* of bad poems (or worse, non-poems) and the workshops for teaching uncreative writers how to be creative. There were also the seminars organised and dominated by *sasterawan* and *seniman* who were unaware of their contradictions in discussing — without a single non-Bumi present as a discussant — how their own works, written in Malay on issues wholly of interest to Malays, as National Literature. Salleh even invented the categories of *Jebat sasterawan* and *Tuah sasterawan*. It appeared to him that the Hang Tuahs were mostly deserving of the honour of being conferred the *Anugerah Sastera Negara* (National Laureate Award). But he added that being a Hang Tuah was not necessarily a bad thing. He was also particularly incensed by the way in which the *sasterawan* indiscriminately imported English words into his Malay, marring it by changing their spelling and turning them into ugly Malay words. He also took offence to how they used old and obscure Malay words without knowing their original meaning (often with hilarious results). His writings ultimately earned him the undeserved reputation of being anti-Islam and unMalay. His enemies ascribed unworthy motives to him for writing critiques of them and their public views. This was not surprising when he published poems such as this:

From *Belakang Mati 2*

*Di depan tiap pintu pondok  
mereka mengerumun seperti lalat  
sebelum mengambil langkah berani  
(Cuma empat ringgit... satu lali.  
Inflasi dunia... lain di sini.)  
  
Cepat le! Lima minit dah habis!  
Bisikan gurau di susuli rayuan*

*penub mengab, serak bosan*

*Jalan murah ke syurga tidak ada*

*liku-likunya...*

His poems defied all prevailing conventions of Malay poetics. They of course shocked the proper and fragile sensibilities of the *sasterawan* who frowned (and still do) on any public literary discourse which dealt with sex, especially such a sinful matter as prostitution (horror of horrors), in an explicit manner. They viewed sex as totally abhorrent (at least in their public pronouncements). It was beyond their comprehension that poets could also celebrate the body and its needs and see this as being touched by the divine. A poem such as the following — which is in fact a powerful statement implying that sexual ecstasy shades into mystical ecstasy — was therefore outrageous as it was seen as disrespectful towards the Prophet and Islam:

*The Woman Who Said Yes:*

*Trembling with terror, he reached for her skirt*

*The echo of the fierce voice in the cave*

*Still thundered in the depths of his soul:*

*"... from a clot of blood... the Most Beautiful..."*

*Unable to recite these dreaded words,*

*He was almost smothered in Its embrace.*

*When down the hill he ran, it was everywhere*

*In front of him, above him—in the mind.*

*"Cover me Khatijah!: Devil or angel?*

*The sweat of terror drowned his certainty.*

*"Get inside me! You'll know for sure."*

*He did - and terror burst into ecstasy.*

*The apparition withdrew with angelic tact,  
His prophethood was confirmed in the act.*

The *sastreraman* found justification for regarding Salleh as anti-Malay and even an apostate in his being thoroughly Westernized and having lost his Malay roots (that is, in their eyes) and in his writing in English. The fact that he also wrote in Malay apparently did not count. However, if you read his writing as a whole, you will see that the clear and shining thread that runs through the best of them is his passionate defence of the integrity of the word. This is language that is not corrupted by being put to the service of literature and other public discourse to propagate or perpetuate narrow unaccommodating religious, racial, or cultural ideologies or just social and political attitudes founded on a perverse ill will or just sheer ignorance. You will sense that his cutting irony and derision that are reserved for offending parties, be they writers or bureaucrats or self-appointed guarantors of the purity of the faith, came from outrage at actions and pronouncements which hinted at the possibility of corruption of the word. Salleh's concern over the integrity of the word was tied up with what his hero, Vaclav Havel, had expressed as "living in truth." Salleh's own words describe it most eloquently: "This is a mode of being that affirms the humanity and dignity of man, the potential uniqueness of each individual and his life, and the vital necessity of freedom for the survival of his soul and his humanity on this earth." He learnt from Havel that a totalitarian system could completely undermine one's ability to "live in truth" via a deliberate and calculated misuse of language. As Havel noted, language was formalized and ritualized in a totalitarian communist state like Czechoslovakia — depriving it of its semantic contact with reality. This resulted in reality being replaced by a formalized and ritualized pseudo reality.

This critique of language, Salleh averred, could apply to other political systems, including a materialist capitalist system such as ours. Have things changed since Salleh wrote for the NST's Literary Page? Whatever the signs of the times may tell us, I do not think so. The ideologues of whatever persuasion, enemies of the word and therefore of truth in Havel's broad humane sense are very much with us still — in fact in an even more virulent form, as they are everywhere else in the world. It is not that Salleh had written in vain. It is because our *sasterawan* and *cendiakawan* have failed to carry out their moral responsibility. Due to their inanity, sense of entitlement, and a narrow concept of themselves as artists, they perhaps thought that it was not their part to speak the truth against falsifications, misinformation, and outright lies. In thinking more deeply about the matter, I feel that we ourselves are not entirely free of culpability. Too many of us go through the day minding our own business, in careless disregard of whatever distortions of the truth that

are put out in the public realm by those with special interests of their own. There are also those who are already conditioned to accept whatever that is told them. Thus, we the people become a herd ripe to be manipulated by whatever interests, to advance agendas almost always to our detriment. For lies and disinformation not to take root and spread insidiously among a people, we need to be constantly reminded that we should be wary of questionable statements and critically examine them. We need a growing majority to speak for the truth even if it is just among ourselves. To all of us who understand this, writings such as Salleh's — that speak for the truth — serve as ever-present and necessary reminders of what we need to do. That is why, more than twenty years on, Salleh is still relevant.